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Introduction to *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*

G.M. Goshgarian

Verso will soon release *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, featuring a translation of “Sur la reproduction des relations de production” (RRP), the posthumously issued manuscript from which Althusser culled his well-known ISAs paper. The volume will also include an introduction by Jacques Bidet, who edited the manuscript for the PUF in 1995; a preface by Etienne Balibar on RRP's complex genesis; a reprint of Ben Brewster's translation of the ISAs paper; and “Note on the ISAs,” based on an extract from Althusser's 1976 *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* (see Item X).

“On the Primacy of the Relations of Production” is an Appendix to RRP. Like the rest of the manuscript, it was written against the background of the relatively late Althusserian analysis of May 1968. Produced after a depression that incapacitated Althusser from mid-April 1968 to January 1969, this analysis is available in two related publications roughly, and perhaps exactly, contemporaneous with RRP: a 15 March 1969 letter to Maria Antonietta Macciocchi included in her August 1969 *Lettere dall'interno del P.C.I. a Louis Althusser* (put out in English by New Left Books in 1973) and “A propos de l'article de Michel Verret sur 'Mai étudiant,’” published in *La Pensée* in June 1969. In the letter to Macciocchi, Althusser locates the key to May 1968 – to put it in aleatory materialist terms – in a relatively contingent “encounter” which, because it did not last, failed to precipitate the “birth of a world,” despite, to stick to the terms of his 1969 letter, the “void opened by the virtual defeat of bourgeois ideology.” Specifically, according to the same letter, although the mainly young people in one of the two giant Parisian processions marching through this ideological void on 13 May 1968 deviated from their set route and, in “extraordinary encounter,” rubbed shoulders with the workers in the other, the two forces failed to hook up. Thus this promising conjunction of working-class and popular forces did not “become ... a long encounter.” Even after the outbreak of the “sensational” May-June general strike, “the *most significant event in Western history* since the Resistance and the victory over Nazism,” the “brief encounter” of the two marches continued to “condition the form of all subsequent encounters” between workers and non-workers. Thus “13 May ... had, *essentially*, no sequel.” It “was an historic *encounter*, not a fusion. An encounter may occur or not occur. It can be a 'brief encounter,' *relatively* accidental, in which case it will not lead to any *fusion* of forces.... An encounter that is, or becomes, a long encounter must necessarily take the form of a *fusion*. This did not happen in May.”

Why not? First, the mainly “libertarian-anarchist,” “petty bourgeois” rebels had been guided by an “infantile-leftist” vision that the workers had spurned: they thought that they, not the workers' political and trade-union organizations, would “lead the working class towards the Revolution.” Second, the “deplorable gulf” between French youth and the PCF had helped tip their movement toward “*gauchisme*.” Partly to blame for this were “reasons of an international nature.” Whence Marxist philosophy's task: to teach the young people in revolt about “the reality of the working class” and the historical vocation of its class-struggle organizations, so as to help them “establish a lasting juncture with the Workers' Movement”; but, equally important, to determine why the Workers' Movement had not been in any position to engineer that juncture with the “profoundly progressive” “mass ideological revolt.”

Althusser had tackled this twofold task early in 1969. He rapidly turned out a text, “De la superstructure,” that was intended to introduce (or soon earmarked to introduce) a study, begun in 1968 by five of his collaborators, of “the apparatus *par excellence* for the inculcation of bourgeois ideology, the capitalist educational system,” to which the wayward products of that system, he exults in his letter to Macchiocchi, had done “irreparable harm” in May. “De la superstructure” was later revised and considerably augmented, becoming RRP. It is impossible to date the two drafts precisely. According to one indication of Althusser's, he produced both between January and April; according to another, he produced only the first in “March-April.” What is certain is that the collective project on the schools soon aborted, for reasons evoked in Balibar's preface, and that, as Bidet indicates, Althusser continued to emend the second draft of his now orphaned introduction even after submitting the ISAs essay to *La Pensée* for publication in June 1970. A for the Appendix below, it first appears in RRP, and is therefore, like the rest of the second draft, not datable. “De la superstructure,” however, already sums up its main theses, announcing that they will be “demonstrated elsewhere.” In any case, Althusser had, by March 1969, already adopted the most provocative thesis advanced in the Appendix: that Marx – more exactly, the Hegelian Marx of the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and the *Grundrisse* – was partly responsible for the main “reason of an international nature” for the May rebels' hostility to the Moscow-loyal PCF: Stalinism. Other 1968-69 texts go further: quoted “in a combined way,” they assert that the Hegelian Marx partly to blame for the Gulag survived even in *Capital* – despite what Marx had learned from the proto-Marxist Hegel.

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“The Althusserians,” Raymond Aron jibed in a 1967 anti-Althusserian polemic, “do not like to cite the [1859] Preface.” This certainly held for Althusser, who had

since 1960 been studiously ignoring it while denouncing the Hegelian Marxism codified in it. Hegelian Marxists twist the Marxist dialectic, *For Marx* protests, into the “exact mirror image” of Hegel's, making “the political and ideological” “pure phenomena of the economic” and history the programmed exfoliation of a transhistorical essence. The “only difference” is that, for their Marx, it is “no longer a question of deriving successive [historical] moments from the Idea, but from the Economy,” in line with an economism that Marx's “famous comments on the hand-mill, water-mill, and steam-mill” might *seem* to warrant. In fact, Marx had parted company with Hegel in 1845, consummating their break in 1857.

For Marx also pinpoints the main political danger bred by the Hegelian Marxist dogma that economic progress spawns a succession of ever “higher” modes of production: it provides pseudo-Marxist justification for a classically bourgeois ideology and politics, including the bourgeois ideology and politics of hostility to politics. Specifically, it justifies the belief that socialism will arrive “through the action of the economy alone.” Such thinking does not, in Althusser's view, merely provide ideological *cover* for a reformism whose real springs lie elsewhere. Rather, as he spells out in an anonymous 1966 essay on another “mass ideological revolt,” the Chinese Cultural Revolution, “ideology can be the strategic point where everything is decided.” In his earlier work, the prime example of the reactionary politics engendered by the ideology of the Preface is the Second International's economistic evolutionism. The Appendix, effectively endorsing Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, adds two more: opposition to socialist revolutions in societies that have not first undergone a putatively obligatory stage of bourgeois development; and Stalinism.

As for the Hegel-Marx relation, the Appendix unabashedly throws over the manifestly untenable claims put forward in *For Marx* as if Althusser had never made them, identifying what *For Marx* calls the Hegelian Marxists' positions as the Hegelian Marx's. At the same time, however, it draws a new, equally untenable line of demarcation in Marx: “all of *Capital* protests against this Hegelianism in its deepest spirit and, barring a few unfortunate but rare formulas, its letter as well.” Althusser had probably abandoned that idea by the time he wrote that sentence. He had certainly abandoned it by the time he finished a “Preface to *Capital* Volume One” in March 1969. And he had long since arrived at a more finely shaded view of “Hegelianism.”

If we do not take *For Marx*'s oddly circumstantial denial of the Hegelian strain in the post-1845 Marx as a coded admission of it, Althusser's first major acknowledgment that Marx owed a positive debt to Hegel went hand-in-hand with his admission that Marx continued to feel Hegel's negative influence long after 1845. Both points are made in the 1967 “Humanist Controversy,” which affirms that Marx carried out a “*continuing* break” with (the idealist) Hegel from 1845

almost to the end of his career, but says, as well, that Marx owed (the proto-materialist) Hegel “the fundamental philosophical category on which *Capital* rests,” the “process without a subject.” Althusser included the passage of the posthumously published “Humanist Controversy” on Marx's positive debt to Hegel in a February 1968 seminar lecture that was published in 1970 as “Marx's Relation to Hegel.” As for the concept of the “continuing break,” it finds a practical application not only in the Appendix, but also in “Preface to *Capital* Volume One,” in which Althusser flatly states that he gave “much too abrupt” an idea of Marx's break with Hegel when he tried to “locate this rupture” in 1845. More important, the “Preface to *Capital*” effectively rebuts the Appendix's contention, repeated in the 21 March 1969 *Humanité* article on which the “Preface to *Capital*” is based, that *Capital* is essentially free of negative Hegelian influence, terminology aside. Althusser now finds “flagrant and extremely harmful” “traces” of Hegel in the opening section of *Capital*, and issues his notorious call to “rewrite” that part of the book. Thus the Appendix and the “Preface to *Capital*,” read together, provide evidence of Althusser's own continuing break with the idea of Marx's epistemological break. It continues in the critique, prominent in the posthumously published 1980 “Marx in his Limits,” of the “fictitious unity” of Marx's order of exposition in *Capital*, and culminates in the denunciation of the “totalitarian, teleological and philosophical” Marxian conception of the mode of production in Althusser's late work.

Althusser's “Preface to *Capital*,” written for a mass-market edition of Marx's magnum opus, may well become his most widely read work in the Francophone world, because it now accompanies the French translation of *Capital* Volume One on the website marxists.org. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this text is what it includes but, because the publisher found earlier versions of it “too polemical,” downplays: the argument about Hegelian Marxism and Stalinism presented in the Appendix, which, together with the larger manuscript of which it is a part, is the fullest development of *For Marx*'s embryonic analysis of Soviet socialism in Althusser (“Marx in his Limits,” if Althusser had finished it as planned in 1980, would doubtless have pursued the discussion much further). “Existing superstructures and particularly the *ideologies*,” according to *For Marx*, did not only not disappear “at one blow” after the working-class seized state power in Russia, or linger on as mere “survivals”; they were “reactivated” and erected into a “terribly positive reality.” RRP defines “reactivation” as the incorporation of pre-Soviet ideological apparatuses into the new proletarian dictatorship, and maintains, in sum, that the Party should have led the masses in a protracted struggle aimed at destroying these capitalist components, among others, of the Soviet state machine, in order to replace them with structures capable of revolutionizing “ideological relations.” Instead, the CPSU chose to fuse with a

state bent on choking off independent mass initiative in order to develop the economy, at all costs. More precisely – since the relations of production are also “the economy” – the Party-state defined its task as development of the productive forces to the exclusion of a necessarily class-conflictual transformation of the relations of production. Marx's 1859 Preface provided the theoretical justification for this anti-political politics. In the midst of the “stupefying” “systematic massacres” that were the price to pay for it, Althusser does not hesitate to note – but only in texts he never published – their chief architect withdrew to his study to copy the heart of the 1859 Preface into a philosophy primer that became the cornerstone of the state ideology of the USSR.